

Link Between Violence in Media and Real World Hard to Prove

By Paul K. McMasters

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In May 2005, video-game developer Rockstar Games, publisher of the controversial “Grand Theft Auto” series, announced that this October it would release a game called “Bully.” The one-sentence announcement merely said that the game, rated for players 13 years and older, featured “a troublesome schoolboy” confronting the problems of being dumped at a fictitious reform school.

But that was enough to send battalions of activists and others into a panic.

School boards around the nation banned the game. Young demonstrators gathered outside Rockstar’s headquarters in New York. CNN’s Lou Dobbs warned his viewers that “Bully” was another example of our culture in decline.

All this occurred, mind you, before the video game was seen, let alone put on the market.

“Bully” appears to be a lot tamer than a lot of other gaming fare. Clive Thompson, who reviewed it on Wired.com earlier this month, wrote that “The game doesn’t glorify bullying at all. Indeed, it’s almost precisely the opposite.”

But before its contents were actually known, Miami lawyer Jack Thompson, who campaigns against pornography and rap music as well as video games, had persuaded a Florida judge to order a demonstration of the game in court. On Oct. 13, Judge Ronald Friedman ruled that the game did not qualify as a “public nuisance” under the pollution law invoked in Thompson’s lawsuit and allowed the game’s release. The judge noted in court that “Bully” did contain some violence but “less than we see on television every night.”

Ironically, Friedman’s decision came one day after a federal judge in Oklahoma blocked enforcement of a new state law prohibiting the sale of violent video games to children – the latest in a lengthening list of similar decisions across the nation.

Video games, it appears, are replacing television, which replaced movies, which replaced the penny press, as the “new pornography” threatening the minds and morals of the nation’s youth.

Module 1 – Violence: Media, Sport, Video Game

Readings

For more than eight decades, dating to the Payne Fund studies on movie violence in 1933, experts have produced study after study and political leaders have conducted hearing after hearing, all in an effort to prove – by repetition if not by hard evidence – that media violence harms young people, even adults.

Despite those efforts, drawing a straight line from violence in the media to violence in reality remains difficult if not impossible. The cause-and-effect relationship cannot be produced reliably in the lab nor demonstrated plausibly in real life. Common experience, common sense and logic also get in the way.

Hard evidence in the form of crime statistics goes in the other direction.

Although there has been a steady – and to some an alarming – increase in fictional violence in electronic media over recent decades, that has been accompanied by a steady decline in the violent-crime rate. The number of violent crimes per 100,000 people has gone from a high in 1990 of 729.6 to 469.2 in 2005.

Statistics for juveniles are even more dramatic. Juvenile arrest rates for all crimes decreased by 31 percent between 1996 and 2004. According to the Violent Crime Index maintained by the FBI, the violent-crime arrest rate among 10-to 17-year-olds for 2004 was lower than in any year since 1980 – and 49 percent below the peak year of 1994.

More parental involvement, along with character building in school and responsibility on the part of the media, are the appropriate ways to address concerns raised by violent media.

But delegating that job to legislators, judges and would-be censors driven by fear and hunches is unwise, ineffective, and ultimately, unconstitutional.